In late 2012, four artists, Maria Madeira and Victor De Sousa from Timor, Narelle Jubelin and Fiona MacDonald from Australia, founded the Cross Art Projects, an initiative of the three districts of Timor Leste to witness its reconstruction from a war-torn earth and to consider connections between women’s woven textiles known as ta’ais and the contemporary art world. While each artist’s practice was diverse, ranging over documentary, painting, printmaking, weaving and wood and print installation, the artists shared an interest in processes that engage art, archives and communities to counter the erasure of memory.

This independent project began with an ongoing conversation about Timor Leste’s cultural renewal between curator Jennifer Phipps (2012 – 2014, Narelle Jubelin). While imperative to maintain initiatives such as the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory’s few collection of South East Asian and Timorese textiles, they also hoped to generate sustainable cross-cultural initiatives for Timorese artists.

The outcome of the field research is a compilation called Elasticas / Borracha / Elástico, that spans a set of prints, exhibitions and events in Darwin and Sydney, and a catalogue and bibliography to be launched in Dili later this year! Elasticas shows the more subversive face of territories that gave rise and form to Timor Leste’s four-decade struggle that followed Portugal’s de-colonisation of Timor Leste and the Indonesian invasion in 1975.

The Elasticas exhibit (ten prints, photographs and a video artwork by De Sousa and MacDonald) is a unique record of the re-discovery of Timor Leste and the Indonesian invasion in 1975.

The Elasticas archive (ten prints, photographic images on Creative Commons and video artworks by De Sousa and MacDonald) is a unique record of the re-discovery of Timor Leste and the Indonesian invasion in 1975.

The prints show weavers at a backstrap loom working in the heart of their community. For thousands of years these textiles, that vary by district and village, have been integral to social, spiritual, and economic life. Heirloom ta’ais can take years to make, others are made for everyday wear or to trade. Each ta’ais is re-feit and re-imagined by the weaver with stories and struggles sometimes embedded. The frontispiece of the print set is a quote by weaver Albertina da Cruz do Altas: ‘Even though they look very similar, we know which ta’ais we made, it is like our own hand. We can see the “place of our hand” it is like our own fingerprint. Each of us know exactly the place where our hands have touched.’

For supporters around the world the small hand-woven ta’ais traded at Free Timor Leste fundraisers, presented to bigwigs, or pictured in hand-printed in campaign ephemera, were our introduction to Timor Leste culture. Now preserved in top drawers, sewn boxes or folders, this material is evidence of the wider collaboration that quietly sits alongside the bigger historical narrative.

The Darwin exhibition draws on the archives of a unique group of Australian and Timorese refugee activists, artists and performers from the new defiant Darwin-based Australians For A Fair East Timor (AFFET, active 1991 – 2008). In 1995 they created Tubã-Ra Meitín, firmly gripping the earth, an installation of a Timorese sacred culture house (uma lulk) for the Darwin Fringe Festival after it was rejected by the Darwin Museum and Art Gallery. It was installed/guested in a government precinct called Federal Square adjacent to our Darwin venue, the Chan Contemporary Art Space. AFFET member and master weaver Veronica Persica Maia generously lent to the Darwin Elasticas exhibition her starring Ta’ais Don, a 5-piece a memorial of the names of those killed in the 1991 Santa Cruz Massacre in Dili, woven beside the uma lulk over the duration of Tubã-Ra Meitín.

In the prints, two images of oil wells appear as pointers to the contest over oil and gas resources in the Timor Sea between the disproportionately resource rich nations Australia and Timor Leste. While Elasticas / Borracha / Elástico was being exhibited in October – November 2014, the new Timor Gapaccords between Australia and Timor Leste were being tested for their equity and fairness. To date this has not succeeded. As part of the Darwin exhibition, expert speakers outlined the tiny nation’s life-and-death economic stale in the outcome.

By respecting these art traditions, the Elasticas collective honours the resistance and quietly reviews this term activism, crucially, as part of a new wave of artists across Southeast Asia rethinking the division between aesthetics and political/academic practice. Far from established art-world circuits the Elasticas print set and its accompanying texts speak to a public who shares and understands a distinct and identifiable cross-cultural history and has, of necessity, created a hybrid form of cultural activism.

The prints will be strategically gifted to Timor as part of a national/local project of sister-city relationships between Timor Leste and Australia, including between Dili and Darwin councils, initiated by resistance leader Jose Xanana Gusmão in 2006 – 2007 when serving as the first President of East Timor. It is hoped the prints can tour from Dili to the weaving districts. The Northern Centre for Contemporary Art now has an ongoing Dili to Darwin platform to continue earlier commissions by Darwin Festival and Timor Leste’s inaugural arts festival Arts Publiku.

References
1. Timor Leste was independent in 2002 after centuries of Portuguese colonial rule and occupation. We are an independent curator. Jennifer Phipps had instead and respectfully repurposed pencils in a less grand manner and to Hailemariam as to red瘦身 an apo prison. In the business today initiated in this direction and evolved the collaboration of the curators. The print set and catalogue was not in our project such as the Rock Foundation is an hefty handcrafted metal set up by Handa. See David Lamelas ‘The Fall of the Roman Empire’ and their prominent place in the exhibition.
2. Elasticas / Borracha / Elástico, curated by Jubelin and the artists. Exhibitions: Elasticas / Borracha / Elástico: Mobile Residency (Dili, Timor Leste, Chan Contemporary Art Space, Darwin, 17 September – 12 October 2014, presented by The Northern Centre for Contemporary Art and including participation works by a symposium, Elasticas / Borracha / Elástico: Mobile Residency (Dili, Chan Contemporary Art Space, The Cross Projects, Sydney, 28 September – 18 October 2014. The Ottoman House in the local history of Dili from AFFET to Timor Theory just on where Sydney hailed at the current form. A catalogue and bibliography was published by the Cross Art Projects, Sydney, 2016.
3. The collaboration between Jubelin and Phipps is ongoing and the poster exhibitions is available on www.crossart.com.au.
4. The Ta’ais is inspired by the daring art rebellion and resistance printmaking traditions of Southeast Asian which incorporate the dynamic line prints of Tenng Piah and the freelance Art Collection and the Kiwi Culture Kitchen as well as Australian silk-screen printers and activist agitator printmakers.

Maria Madeira, Fiona MacDonald
Elasticas / Borracha / Elástico
(2012 Timor Leste Mobile Residency Archive), 2014,
Offset lithographic, set of 10 prints, 67.5 x 57 cm (framed), 67.5 x 46.5 cm (print size), Ed: 30.
Printed by the artists with Big Fat Press, Sydney.

Narelle Jubelin, Victor De Sousa
Elasticas / Borracha / Elástico
(2012 Timor Leste Mobile Residency Archive), 2014, Offset lithographic, set of 10 prints, 67.5 x 57 cm (framed), 67.5 x 46.5 cm (print size), Ed: 30.
Printed by the artists with Big Fat Press, Sydney.